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Feminism Psychology 2008; 18; 268

DOI: 10.1177/0959353507083098

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‘I Don’t Think People Really Talk about It That Much’: Young Women Discuss Feminism

Annadís G. RÚDÓLFSDÓTTIR and Rachel JOLLIFFE

INTRODUCTION

Is the ‘third wave’ of feminism online at a computer near us, as the *Guardian* newspaper (Cochrane, 2006) claims, or have we stepped into the cultural space of post-feminism, where the feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are being undermined by popular culture and repudiated by many young women, as McRobbie (2004) argues? This article explores how nine young female undergraduate students relate to feminism both as an ideological movement and as a possible identity position. It is intended as a contribution to the ongoing discussion about young women’s relationship to feminism (e.g. Frith, 2001; Griffin, 2001; Sharpe, 2001).

In her research on working-class women’s relationship with feminism, Skeggs (1997) reminds us that feminism does not form a unitary, clearly defined theory or category and that women’s relation to, and appropriation of, feminism depends on the knowledge of feminism they have access to (see also Griffin, 2001). Women do not normally get acquainted with feminism by reading feminist manifestos; rather they see glimpses of it in popular culture (however feminism is reworked and presented there) and in their interactions with others. Skeggs’ (1997) work also portrays compellingly how access to feminism is limited and/or enabled by women’s social positions. Class, ethnicity, sexuality and all the other axes of power that cut through our lives have a bearing on how and whether we feel able to identify with any form of feminism.

Late modernity and the changes that have occurred socially, culturally and economically have presented new challenges to both young women and feminism. Some of the social institutions traditional femininity has been embedded in and defined from, such as ‘marriage’ and the ‘nuclear family’, have become ‘mobile, unsettled and open’ (Giddens, 1991: 12). Others such as ‘motherhood’ are contested and have become the foci of public debates (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991).

Feminism & Psychology © 2008 SAGE (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore)
<http://fap.sagepub.com>, Vol. 18(2): 268–274; 0959-3535
DOI: 10.1177/0959353507083098

Young middle-class women, it has been argued, take for granted that they can have a career (Sharpe, 2001), consider equality to have been achieved (Budgeon, 2001; Sharpe 2001) and expect to be taken seriously as self-determining adults on an equal footing with men (Aapola et al., 2005). Simultaneously, young women have been described as oppressed, alienated and abused in a 'girl poisoning culture' (Pipher, 1994, cited in Frith, 2001) and therefore need to engage with feminism (Frith, 2001).

Aapola et al. (2005) identify a number of young feminist groupings, most of which use the internet as their venue for discussion and organization, which draw on and reformulate feminism to varying degrees. However, research looking at young women's relationship to feminism shows that not all women think feminism is relevant to their lives and that their attitude to feminism may be at best ambivalent. Budgeon (2001), who interviewed young women aged 16–20, found that the young women recognized the prevalence of a 'barrier' to equality, but suggested that women take 'responsibility for what they want as individuals' (p. 17). Both Sharpe (2001) and Rich (2005) found that, although the young women they interviewed expressed feminist ideals and values, they were reluctant to label themselves as feminists. In this regard, Griffin (1989) suggests young women fail to identify themselves as feminists because they are unsure of what feminism really is. This theory is supported by the work of Aronson (2003), who found that while young women expressed support for feminist goals they were finding it hard to position themselves in relation to feminism. So, if these women not only appreciate feminist gains, but also embody feminist ideals, why do they not want to label themselves as 'feminist'?

It appears that their reluctance to identify with the term 'feminist' may be related to concerns 'over their embodied femininity' (Rich, 2005: 503). The word 'feminist' clearly has a plethora of negative connotations and is often countered or seen as antithetical with femininity. Denfeld (1995) proposes that the term 'feminism' itself has come to stand for an extremist group and therefore alienates a young generation of women. Budgeon (2001) and Sharpe (2001) both also identify how the individualism of late modernity and the emphasis on personal choice prevent young women from embracing feminist cultural critiques and activism. The idea of feminism as a collective movement with clear common goals fits uneasily with the rhetoric of individualism, where the focus is on identity politics and self-realization through lifestyle choices.

There are many signs that hard-won feminist achievements are at best tenuous and there are still many areas in young women's lives that deserve feminist attention. In this regard, young women as a group have been singled out as experiencing insecurities about their bodies, low self-esteem and a propensity for self-harm (Aapola et al., 2005) as well as facing mixed messages about their sexual agency (e.g. Holland et al., 2004). One of the areas given special attention is the way popular culture addresses women, since the popular media is an arena in which portrayals of young femininity are particularly prominent. McRobbie (2004) sees an 'entanglement' between feminist and anti-feminist ideas in the

media. Feminism, she argues, has had a partial success in imparting its values and raising awareness of gendered issues such as domestic violence, rape and war in the media, but, at the same time, equality is seen to be achieved and feminism is therefore represented as a 'spent force'. In addition, 'empowerment', like equality, a key concept of feminist activism, is popularly represented as the individual narcissistically and selfishly working on herself, rather than being about collective action focusing on social change (Tyler, 2005).

Gill (2007) charts some of the subtle mechanisms of contemporary sexism in popular culture and outlines why it is such a challenge for feminist critique. Sexism is dressed up as fashionably 'retro', ironic and tongue in cheek, so that any criticism invites counter-criticism of humour failure and prudishness. Feminism and feminist identities are thus construed as out of touch with the lives and identities of young women, who are 'having a great time' (Griffin, 2001) and have nothing in common with 'hairy, scary' feminists.

It seems from all of this that young women today, like the generations of young women before them, could make good use of feminism as a tool to challenge unequal power relations and as a prism through which to analyse gendered arrangements in contemporary society. But what kind of feminisms do they see as available, what role do they see for feminism in contemporary society and do they want to identify themselves as feminists?

THE STUDY

The women interviewed for this study were young (18–23 years old), educated, middle-class women. Eight self-identified as white British and one as black Kenyan. The interviews focused on the women's conceptualization of feminism; what being a feminist meant to them and how relevant they felt feminism was in their lives. They were also asked about representations of feminism in the media and their understanding of post-feminism. The interviews were conducted and transcribed by the second author for a final-year undergraduate project. The interviews were analysed by both authors using thematic analysis along the lines described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes discussed in this article are: 'feminism and equality', 'extreme feminists' and 'I am not a (post)-feminist but . . .'

RESULTS

Feminism and Equality

When first asked about feminism and what feminism meant to them, many of the young women seemed confused about its meaning. However, when pressed, almost all of the young women defined feminism and the goals of feminism as

being about ensuring institutional or formal equality between men and women. This, they felt, had ‘almost’, but not entirely, been accomplished. They were grateful for the past achievements of feminism but argued that in the 21st century feminism as a political movement had lost its relevance:

Of course I’m very grateful for everything that I can do and everything now . . . like I can wear trousers, women don’t just have to wear skirts and stay at home and I’m very glad that I can go out to work and I’m very grateful for women’s votes and all that jazz, but I don’t see where else it would go or how else it would relate to me in the future or unless obviously things change. (Sarah)

The women referred to both *appreciating* feminist gains in the sense of being aware of what these gains are, and *appreciation* in the sense of ‘being grateful for’ these gains. In this regard, many of the women discussed their and other women’s freedom to vote, to aim for successful and well-paid careers and to leave behind the stereotypical housewife and mother role. At the same time, these young women often felt that women’s equal rights were taken for granted:

I still definitely have an appreciation of what was done ‘cos I, as I said, I just don’t think I should take it as much for granted as I probably do, that if I do want to be a doctor or a lawyer or something like that I can do it and it shouldn’t, it might still be a bit, but not nearly as much as it was, it shouldn’t be an obstacle. (Natasha)

Interestingly, at least two-thirds of the young women felt that full equality was unrealistic and one reason offered was that men and women are simply ‘different’ in a physical sense and in their personal orientations to the world:

Men and women are so different I don’t think that you can ever get complete equality because some things are just designed for men to do and some things are designed for women to do . . . I don’t think you can have complete equality because men and women are just different and have different views and, I don’t know, different qualities. (Shannon)

Some of the strategies used to ensure equality in public institutions such as ‘positive discrimination’ and ‘women-only shortlists’ were heavily criticized. Although they did not see men as having lost out because of feminist actions, these young women felt these strategies could compromise men’s status and send out the signal that women want to be ‘superior’ to men not equal.

Extreme Feminists

The young women made many references to what they saw as the ‘stereotypical’ view of the feminist or referred to ‘other people’s views’. Descriptions that recurred were ‘lesbian’, ‘masculine’, ‘man hating’, ‘angry’ and ‘embarrassing’. As Claire said when trying to sum up how a feminist is perceived: ‘Maybe some-

one who doesn't really wash, with hairy armpits and of the lesbian variety.' Although there was some appreciation of this view of feminism as being 'unfair' and 'unrepresentative', some of the young women subscribed strongly to the view that feminists could be inflexible, fastidious and unfair and that feminists sometimes wanted more power than men:

Hard women in your face and always promoting themselves almost above men, rather than as equals and I don't really agree with that, I think we should be equals rather than women putting themselves above men especially with this whole bra burning thing, I just don't get that. (Jackie)

There seemed to be some fear that by subscribing to feminism one might lose one's femininity and that was something the young women did not want to compromise:

The kind of extreme feminists are portrayed negatively but then there are people, the kind of women in powerful jobs that are portrayed very positively . . . and as I say kind of female newsreaders and presenters who will you know present an entire show, it's in their control . . . but as well they're allowed to be feminine, they're allowed to have all their make-up and nice clothes and things and kind of have that balance rather than just going to the extreme which is, which in my opinion is what people who say 'yes I am a feminist' are like, because there is that stigma attached to saying 'I am a feminist' and I think women that still want to be feminine are a bit reluctant to want to say I am a feminist. (Natasha)

This positioning of feminism and femininity as almost antithetical shows how, as Holland et al. (2004) argue, young women have bought into the heterosexism of contemporary society. The kind of femininity a woman embraces has to fit in with the dominant culture's definition of what is 'right', and 'proper', and the feminist who challenges that system forfeits her right to be seen as having an 'attractive' femininity.

I Am Not a (Post-)Feminist, but . . .

Most of the young women were reluctant to call themselves feminists, at least at this point in time, but they were equally ambivalent about labelling themselves as post-feminists. In the interviews, post-feminism was defined by the interviewer as the position of seeing feminism as a 'mission accomplished' and as embarrassing:

I can see that point of view [post-feminism], I don't think that we need to denounce feminism, I just don't think we need to be so aggressive about it as in the past just because of um the feminists succeeded, so um but I wouldn't say I was embarrassed about feminism, if there was a need for feminism, then I'd be up for it. (Amy)

When they did sign up to the post-feminist label, they drew on the ideas of feminism as 'extreme' and as possibly being about women wanting to be superior to men.

CONCLUSION

It was disheartening to see how little engagement the young women had with feminism. Although they did not want to dismiss or denounce feminism and appreciated the feminist battles that had been waged on their behalf, most of them did not see it as relating to their lives, at least not yet. It was also surprising that many of the issues young feminist movements emphasize, such as the pornification of the public sphere and gendered 'body politics', were not brought up in the interviews (see e.g. *feministing.com* (n.d.); Levy, 2005; *The F-Word*, 2001–07; Valenti, 2007a). As both McRobbie (2004) and Gill (2007) point out, it is especially the bodies and lives of women that are seen as in need of improvement, and women 'who are addressed and required to work on and transform the self' (Gill, 2007: 262). Certainly, this is not because women undergraduates are not concerned about these issues. Every autumn, third-year female undergraduate students come looking for supervisors willing to guide them with research projects on how the media affects women's relations to their bodies. They may not always see their initial research question as requiring a feminist perspective but they clearly see the kind of gendered self-scrutiny emphasized in contemporary society as problematic. Feminism we would argue is a useful tool for young women who want to challenge structures of gender inequality and criticize sexist representations of women. Jessica Valenti, a good example of a young woman claiming a public identity as a feminist, argues (Valenti, 2007b):

I truly do believe that feminism is necessary for women to live happy, fulfilled lives – especially given the society we live in, which constantly and consistently tells women that we're just not good enough. All women, especially younger women, deserve feminism in their lives.

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